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AUTHOR McLean, Vianne
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ABSTRACT

This study is one of the few that have addressed the teacher's involvement in children's peer interactions. Some of the ways in which teacher beliefs and intentions interact reflexively with contextual factors to produce particular social realities in preschool settings are examined. Four experienced early childhood teachers of acknowledged ability participated in the study. About 1,000 pages of data were accumulated on each teacher through observations and interviews. The first part of the paper describes the study's methodology. This part covers the decision to focus observations on the teacher's involvement in children's peer interactions, the implementation of a number of data-gathering strategies to provide triangulation, interviews exploring beliefs and intentions, pursuit of interview themes in the observation data, idiosyncratic and regulated coding procedures, and development of case studies focusing on each teacher. The second section briefly discusses findings. Observations suggested that teacher involvement in children's peer interactions could be grouped in six areas: developing a sense of community; helping children gain access to peer play groups; involvement in children's dramatic play; use of social conduct rules; resolving peer conflict situations; arrangement of the physical environment to support peer interaction. Teachers identified a number of mental activities associated with teaching. Apparently similar situations were read in very different ways, indicating the importance of the teacher's definition of the situation. (RH)

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Early Childhood Teacher Decision-Making: A Focus on Children's Peer Interactions

Vianne McLean Ph.D

Senior Lecturer
School of Early Childhood Studies
Brisbane College of Advanced Education
Brisbane, Queensland, Australia

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Introduction

As all early childhood practitioners appreciate, teaching is an exceedingly complex activity. Teachers' real life experiences of teaching bear little resemblance to the calm certainty that pervades many descriptions of early childhood teaching in pre-service teacher education texts (Hildebrand 1985; Hymes 1981). As Jackson (1968:167) wrote:

"Given the complexity of his work, the teacher must learn to tolerate a high level of uncertainty and ambiguity. He must be content with doing not what he *knows* is right, but what he *thinks* or *feels* is the most appropriate action in a particular situation."

In the space and diversity of preschool environments, it is likely that the complexity is even greater - a situation that lead this researcher to describe teaching as it was observed in the present study as:

> "a never-ending series of on-the-spot decisions, involving an impossibly large number of constantly changing contextual factors and often-conflicting concerns."
>
> McLean (1986:572)

The acceptance of this complexity leads one to reject solely-observational data gathering techniques as a pathway to increasing our understanding of teaching. As Fenstermacher (1978) suggests, teacher behaviour can be considered to have no independent meaning, only the meaning it holds for the teacher. Thus the researcher must ask not only: 'how does the teacher behave' but also 'why does the teacher behave in this way?' 'What meanings does this situation hold for this teacher?' Research based on these assumptions has variously been described as 'intentionalist' (Fenstermacher 1978, 1986); 'interpretive' (Doyle 1977a); or 'constructivist' (Magoon, 1983). Such studies do not attempt to produce "experimental derivation of a selected number of elements whose relationships [can] be replicated elsewhere" (Bolster 1983:305) but instead use an ideographic focus to try to achieve an in-depth understanding of a small number of teachers in their particular settings.

The study that is reported here set out to examine some of the ways in which teacher beliefs and intentions interacted reflexively with contextual factors to produce particular social realities in preschool settings. Four experienced early childhood teachers of acknowledged ability participated in the study. (They are referred to as 'Rhonda', 'Kathy', 'Brenda' and 'Nan', though these are not their real names.) Approximately 1000 pages of data were accumulated on each teacher, during 60-65 hours of observation in each setting and approximately seven hours of interviews with each teacher.

The first part of this paper will describe the methodology of this study and the second will briefly discuss some of the findings that emerged.

Methodology

Given the complexity of teaching, it is clear that the researcher cannot hope to observe **all** aspects of teaching. Choices must be made about which aspects will be the focus for observation. But this initial selection must be made with great care, if it is to provide a means of accessing the underlying meanings teaching holds for the teacher.

Such penetration would seem to require an initial scope that is sufficiently narrow to allow detailed observation and recording of the surface (behavioral) interaction; yet sufficiently broad to encourage teachers to reflect upon the meanings not only of a particular interaction, but also their connections with children in a broader sense.

In this study, it was decided to focus observations on the teacher's involvement in children's peer interactions. In early childhood education, concerns related to the child's social and emotional development are not part of a 'hidden curriculum' (Combs etal 1978; Evans 1981; Hosford 1980; Jackson 1968; Overly 1970). They have long been an acknowledged part of the normal curriculum. Despite this acknowledgement, there has been little research or writing focused on early childhood teachers' actions as they attempt to foster children's social development. Early childhood practitioners appear to select their strategies for this area from a smorgasboard of theoretical models. It seems they do not feel a need to limit themselves to a particular theoretical approach. The diversity of available options suggested that this might provide a suitable 'window' through which to access teacher decision-making, and the connections between teacher belief and action.

The narrowing of focus occurred, to the teacher's involvement in children's peer interactions, because this area seemed to capture the complexity of early childhood education interactions, where the stereotypical dyadic interaction between teacher and child is but one of many types of interactional pattern.

In order to provide triangulation, a number of data-gathering strategies were selected. Observations were of two major types. Event sampling was used to record detailed narrative descriptions of each occasion when the teacher became involved in children's peer interactions. Bearing in mind Erikson and Shultz's (1981) concerns with the fragmentation and decontextualization that occurs with this type of selective observation, a "stream of behaviour chronicle" (Le Compte and Goertz 1984:49) of the entire session also was kept. This less-detailed record noted aspects of the physical environment, the general atmosphere of the group and any other salient aspects of the context. In writing accounts of each session, the detailed event records were embedded in the chronicle, so that the entire session became a single narrative.

Interviews also followed two distinct formats. The sessions identified as 'Conversations' were discussions about the observational narratives, based on a 'second-generation interview' strategy (Erikson and Schultz, 1981). This approach uses a record of behaviour (such as videotape, audiotape or in this case, written narratives) as a means of helping teachers to reflect upon those events and verbalize what are usually tacit understandings (Polanyi 1967, Williams Neff and Finkelstein 1981).

These sessions were highly interactive. Often, both researcher and teacher came to the sessions with recollections of the observed events they wished to discuss. These talks provided an opportunity to put together the 'outside-in' perspective of the researcher with the 'inside-out' perspective of the teacher (Yamamoto 1984). This was also the time for 'member-checking' (Dawson 1979:9, Lincoln and Guba 1985:236, Owens 1982:14) when emergent patterns or construals could be discussed with the teacher-participant.

The other form of interview was what Massarik (1981) has described as a 'depth' interview. These low-structure sessions explored such areas as the teacher's recollections of her professional biography, life experiences, and the connections perceived between her own human development and teaching life.

The nature of these interviews enabled exploration of beliefs and intentions. Much of the practical knowledge they accessed is seldom articulated by teachers and these multiple open-ended interview sessions enabled the teachers to return to their important issues many times, as they clarified points in their own thinking.

In keeping with Glaser and Strauss's (1967) grounded theory, categories for analysis of data were not pre-determined, but were allowed to emerge from the data themselves. (A preliminary study with a single teacher (McLean 1985) had trialled several types of data gathering technique and had established basic coding categories, but these were extensively modified during the course of this study.)

Because it was accepted from the beginning that teachers were thinking, intentionalist beings, whose behaviour would hold particular meanings for them, for each teacher the interview data were analysed first. From the information gleaned in interviews, categorization schemes emerged that had both common categories across teachers, and some categories unique to each teacher.

Themes that emerged as important ones for the teacher became threads that could be pursued through the observation data. For example, Brenda made many mentions in the interviews of the importance of "talking things over". She said this had been a major strategy by which she had reached understanding about teaching and she thought it was important for children's learning. In the analysis of observation data, this became one of the (many) categories that helped make sense of Brenda's interactions with children. In a similar fashion, Rhonda repeatedly made mention of herself as "an organizer",

someone who liked life to be well organized and predictable In understanding the patterns of social life in Rhonda's centre, this concept was invaluable It helped make sense of what might otherwise have been seen as puzzling inconsistencies in Rhonda's interactions with children

In addition to these idiosyncratic coding categories, observations also were coded with an extensive system of common categories Six major types of teacher intervention in children's peer interactions were identified, that could account for all of the instances observed (These will be discussed below) More micro-level categories (for example, 'teacher observes peers in interaction' and 'teacher asks information-gathering questions') also were used These could appear in any type of intervention Thus, a single event typically had multiple categories assigned to it and was cross-referenced in several locations As no statistical analysis was carried out on these data, it was not necessary to force complex examples into a single category

In this way, it was possible to honour the natural complexity, yet still sort the data in ways that enabled patterns to emerge Henry's (1971:xv-xvi) statement was found to be particularly appropriate He wrote:

> "I offer no 'typologies', because human phenomena do not arrange themselves obligingly in types, but rather, afford us the spectacle of endless overlapping... The less we know... the easier it is to set up categories, just as the less data we have the easier it is to write a history"

In order to portray the teachers as discrete individuals and not lose their particularistic qualities in an impersonal aggregate of pooled data, the study was analysed and written up as four case studies, which closely conformed to Emig's (1983:163) description of a case study as an "intense, naturalistic examination of a given individual" Each case study began with a detailed description of the context and a concise, yet 'thick' description (Geertz 1973) of the teacher, including such aspects as appearance, characteristic movement and speech patterns, and use of physical contact with children

One of the major sections of each case study contained what was titled the teacher's 'image-of-self-as-teacher' (Clandinin 1986) In effect, this was a reconstruction of the teacher's story (Diamond, in press; Schubert, 1989) of herself and her teaching, distilled from many hours of interviews It told of her history as a teacher, her beliefs about herself as person and as teacher, and her perceptions of the roles she played in children's lives It contained a summary of the teacher's description of her attempts to facilitate children's social development and the relative importance she placed upon this aspect of the curriculum

The second major section described in detail, the observed patterns of interaction between teacher and children, with particular emphasis being given to those occasions when the teacher became involved in children's peer interactions The final section of each case study drew

out some of the connections between the teacher's image-of-self-as-teacher and the observed interactions

Once the separate case studies had 'fixed' these four individuals in a "stable data record" (Erikson 1977), the patterns across teachers were compared. As was stated earlier, investigations such as this do not attempt to provide generalizable formulae that can be applied to a diverse population of teachers and teaching situations. Rather, they attempt to create new understandings or interpretations of particular situations. In the remaining part of this paper some of the insights of teaching gained through this study will be discussed.

Outcomes

If we are to come to understand teachers' actions as they attempt to facilitate children's social development, the contexts in which these attempts occur are of crucial importance. One of the benefits of studies such as this, is the surfacing of the complex network of situational factors that we so often take for granted when the educational settings are familiar ones.

One of the most salient aspects of these preschool contexts was their incredible challenge and diversity. The children were spread over a very large geographic area and at times, there were almost as many different activities as there were children. Thus, the situational aspect that Doyle (1977b) has labelled 'multi-dimensionality' was found to be an accurate descriptor of these contexts. In an ideal world, the teacher would be able to be in many places at once, interacting with children exactly when and how it was most appropriate. But in these real world contexts, it seemed there were times when the situational pressures simply overpowered the teacher's ability to deal with them.

Doyle (1977b) also has identified 'simultaneity' as a dominant feature of classrooms. In this study, teachers often were surrounded by children, seeking help with problems. Seldom were teachers presented with requests in serial order. Typically, interactional events were intertwined. If the interactional events of a session could be graphically displayed in a temporal sense, they would not appear like beads on a string, but as overlapping and intermittent. Often, teachers were obliged to leave interactions partway through, to attend to more pressing demands elsewhere. Sometimes, the teachers returned to earlier situations and picked up the threads of their interaction, or cycled between three or four small groups in relative proximity. Seldom did teachers have the luxury of completing one set of interactions before another began.

Doyle's (1977b) third factor; 'unpredictability' also described these settings well. Although all of these teachers planned their programs with care, these plans often had to be modified extensively, or even discarded entirely, during the course of the session. Flexibility seemed an important component of these teachers' competence.

These then were the contexts in which teacher attempts to facilitate social development were embedded. The situational factors were both a reflection of the social world that had been created in the preschool and a major influence upon it. Across all settings however, observations of the surface-level dimension; teacher behaviour, suggested that teacher involvement in children's peer interactions could be grouped in six areas. These were:

Developing a sense of community
Helping children gain access to peer play groups
Involvement in children's dramatic play
Use of social conduct rules
Resolving peer conflict situations
Arrangement of the physical environment to support peer interactions

Very wide differences were found in the extent and nature of the teachers' involvement in these areas. Although teacher behaviour could be fragmented to the point where the teachers could be said to share a common repertoire, these units of behaviour were combined in ways that made each teacher's involvement in children's peer interactions unique. Whilst several teachers were found to share a similar emphasis on some areas of involvement, it was clear that even these teachers had highly-individualized ways of making sense of events in their classrooms and idiosyncratic patterns of interaction with children.

The teachers identified a number of mental activities associated with teaching. One of the most interesting of these was a form of mental preparation that three of the teachers used, to prepare themselves for the demands of working with young children. Before the children arrived, the teachers tried to purge distracting thoughts from their minds, so as to be tranquil, maximally receptive and moving at the slower pace that they believed was appropriate for young children. This calm state was particularly valued by Brenda, who saw it as essential to her teaching.

In many ways, these teachers showed that they were not immune from the effects of situational pressures. But apparently similar situations were read in very different ways. It seemed the **teacher's interpretation** of the situation was what was most influential. In making sense of events in the classroom, these teachers drew from their own experiences and long-standing beliefs, as well as their perceptions of the immediate situation. There was no "immaculate perception" in these educational settings, only this process of interpretation.

Despite the complexity of the interpretive process, teachers often were required to make very fast decisions (Brenda captured it neatly when she described this rapid on-the-spot decision making as the "quick think") Several strategies for coping with this complexity were suggested from the data:

Particularly in high stress situations, the teachers sometimes appeared to focus on just one or two of the most salient aspects of a situation and ignore other aspects In keeping with Doyle's (1977b) conclusions, it seemed that this strategy might be less than optimal, since it sometimes came at the expense of missed opportunities For example: Nan has been trying hard to meet Julie's need for positive peer contacts by enticing other children to join Julie in her dramatic play, but she is not having much success Nan focuses her attempts on Zita, a generally helpful and compliant child, but fails to note Zita's reluctance (Zita's needs were not well catered for in the subsequent peer interaction with Julie, and after a short period, the play broke down)

Another strategy for dealing with the multitude of factors seemed to centre on the importance teachers placed on the identity of the participants In a great many of the observations, the identity of the children involved was clearly a major influence on the nature of the teacher's decisions For example, Brenda used physical removal of a child as a strategy to end peer conflict **only** when Charles was involved In her own words, Nan "pussy-footed" (ie proceeded gently and cautiously) or "roused" (ie chastised soundly) depending on whether the child involved was the fragile Richard or the robust Dennis

To make complex decisions swiftly, several teachers seemed to have strategies that tried to create at least a few second's space for thought before decisive action was taken In Brenda's highly particularistic program, where rules were few and teacher inputs were decided on a situation-by-situation basis, time to read the situation was critical Brenda used what was almost a biofeedback routine, to stay calm, and slow her responses so there was time for thought before action When entering peer conflict situations, Nan often asked a lot of questions of children, but seemed to pay little attention to the answers before decisively ending the conflict It seemed this might also have been a strategy for "buying a little time" to read the situation before acting

It seemed for each teacher, the well-established nature of certain patterns of interaction also helped them make rapid decisions These familiar strategies did not seem to rely as heavily on a reading of the immediate situation and seemed to allow the teachers to make some decisions without a lot of conscious thought For example, Nan was surprised and pleased to see in the observation narratives, her frequent use of open-ended questions She said there had been a time when she was trying to alter her speech patterns to include this form of questioning, when she had to "stop and think" before every utterance But at the time of this study, she no longer thought about

it. (Nan's description of the long period of conscious, active commitment that was required to incorporate new teaching strategies into one's teaching repertoire was in keeping with the process described by 'Talley', the teacher-participant in the preliminary study (McLean, 1985)

All of these strategies seemed to play some part in the teachers' on-the-spot decision making about the nature of her own involvement in children's peer interactions. But perhaps the most important insight to emerge from the study was the realization that our attempts to make sense of teaching have been hindered by an omission. We have approached the social world of the classroom believing that what goes on there is teaching and learning. In fact, what goes on there is living. For many hours each week, this large group of people finds ways to live together in reasonable harmony. What happens there **some** of that time, is what we know conventionally as 'teaching' and 'learning'.

One of the most widely-accepted assumptions about teaching is that it is a future-directed activity. As Greene (1984:284) describes, teaching is:

> "...the living being who is the teacher, intentionally trying to provoke diverse persons to reach beyond themselves, to become different, to enter a state more desireable than the one they are presently in."

But if we confine our interest only to those future-directed interactions, we miss a vital component - the human interactions that constitute 'living together'.

The use of the broader concept of 'living', to describe what happens between teachers and children is not a new idea. Froebel made use of it and it has continued to receive attention from Humanist education writers such as Ashton-Warner (1963), Hughes (1958), Jackson (1968), and Richardson (1967). The concept of 'living together' enables one to move beyond the future-orientation inherent in 'teaching' or 'education', and incorporate that other important aspect of life in educational settings - the here and now. The teachers in this study were not concerned solely with the futures of their children, with movement along developmental continuums. They also were concerned with the quality of life in the present; the well-being of the children and themselves, here, today.

It seemed that these teachers were attempting to maintain a balance between the demands of the here and now, and the facilitation of development, with the former being the more fundamental concern. If no one was in physical jeopardy, if the group was reasonably settled, and if the teacher was maintaining a level of personal well-being, then the promotion of development became the dominant concern.

It was Brenda who first described her decision making about the nature of her intervention in children's peer interactions as including a "turning point", or a point where the balance tipped from one concern to the other. This metaphor of a balance was found to be useful in making sense of the patterns of interactions observed with other teachers.

Observations and discussions with these teachers suggested that they interpreted classroom events in the context of the whole group. If the demands of the here and now required immediate resolution, their action was swift and focused on the present. If their interpretation of the whole situation suggested more was possible, strategies that deliberately attempted to foster development were utilized. Even as these strategies were used however, monitoring and interpretation continued. If the interchange was a prolonged one, inevitably a point would be reached where the balance tipped, facilitation of development was set aside for the time being, and the teacher would act decisively to end the problem.

Space does not permit a full discussion on the marked differences that were observed between these teachers in the ways in which they interpreted situations, but their image-of-self-as-teacher was found to be a major influence. For example:

Rhonda "the organizer", had created an elaborate system of conduct rules for children that effectively limited the number of peer conflicts that occurred. Rarely was Rhonda called upon to enter these situations and when she did, all that was required was a concise re-statement of the violated rule and the swift application of the consequence (usually the removal of an offending child to a less social activity).

Brenda believed the acquisition of conflict resolution skills was essential for her children and devoted an immense amount of time to this, persevering with facilitative process-oriented inputs even as the remainder of the group moved towards uproar.

Nan, despite seeing value in the children's acquisition of conflict resolution skills, seemed uncomfortable with conflict and typically moved quickly towards ending it, often with a pronouncement of a resolution. (Nan preferred to focus her attention on helping children gain access to peer play groups. She linked her concerns in this area to her desire to protect children from social rejection, something she had vivid memories of from her own childhood.)

To some extent, **Kathy** remained an enigma throughout the study. She described herself as "burnt-out" and observations supported this image. It seemed Kathy was engaged in a struggle to maintain her own sense of well-being and for Kathy, the balance seemed heavily weighted towards the here and now. Kathy's patterns of interaction suggested that one of her major coping strategies was the minimization of demands. Whenever possible, Kathy avoided peer conflicts and

when intervention was called for, often downplayed the situation, urging children to ignore the problem (the "never-mind" response) or make adjustments in their plans to avoid further strife (for example, relocating the site of their play).

Conclusion

This was a complex and detailed study; one that is impossible to convey adequately in a short paper. During the last five years, considerable research activity has occurred in the area of teacher thinking and practical knowledge, but few studies have attempted to link teacher thinking with observations of teacher-child interaction (Schubert 1989; Shulman 1987). This is one of few that has addressed early childhood teacher decision making at the level of curriculum implementation. Such investigations can make a major contribution to our understanding of teaching and provide an expanded knowledge base for early childhood teacher education.

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